Yard Space: Comparisons of General Activity Areas between Historic Period Social Groups

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Yards around the North American houses of enslaved and free blacks have been associated with West African tradition and have been thought to hold particular meaning in African American cultures. It is suggested through oral accounts as well as period images that African Americans in the American south used outdoor spaces as extended living areas for production and recreation. Are the uses or meanings different from those of general activity areas observed cross-culturally? A first step in examining the cultural significance of these spaces is to identify them archaeologically. Through the examination of spatial structure of artifact sites, I have previously determined that we are interpreting patterns consistent with a yard on one site occupied by enslaved African Americans, Monticello’s Site 8. This poster makes a next step in comparing these patterns with those found on a Catawba site occupied at the same time.

1. Thaddeus C. Coffey, Building for the Future New (1990), p. 142, as shown on the map of Monticello. Figure 1 shows the location and layout of the Monticello property.

2. ASI formula was developed with the statistical insight of Fraser Neimann, Monticello Department of Archaeology. New Town cannon data were provided by Thomas A. Bird, University of Virginia. The authors are grateful to Allard Wilkens, University of Virginia, for use of this extended data. Figures 2 and 6 are cartographically rendered and annotated by Harriet Landreth, University of Virginia Library.

3. Measurements of artifact sites, such as ASI, provide a different picture of site spatial structure than sites distribution of artifact and weight, although they are related. The principle of the ASI study is that areas that are maintained free of trash should contain predominantly small artifacts as the result of different collection in trash removal. Ethnoarchaeological research suggests that large trash should form an arc or arcs around the periphery of the maintained site spaces, which should show greater densities of small pieces of trash.

4. Monticello’s Site 8 was occupied by enslaved field hands on the Monticello plantation from about 1770-1800. The houses were log dwellings with all construction, and were likely less than 20 x 20 feet in plan. By the mid in the late 1700s most enslaved plantation workers were living in family units rather than in the barnyard-style housing common in previous periods.

5. Data from the Catawba New Town site in Lancaster County, South Carolina provide a comparison to Monticello’s Site 8. New Town was occupied from the early 1770s until 1815 as the primary settlement of the Catawba Nation (Staunton and Nage, 2004). The site and construction of Catawba dwellings is remarkably similar to those of the houses of enslaved labor force at Monticello during the same time, with earthen floors, log walls, and in some cases, sub-floor pits for storage.

6. Interpreted ASI values show maintained site space along the western edge of the two cabins in Locus 4, and dumping away from the eastern edge of the dwelling and to the south and southeast of the southern house. Cabin 2. A distribution map of count shows very low artifact density across the occupation area. This might be interpreted as complete clearance of trash from an activity area. There is less correlation between ASI and count in the Catawba example, with a Kendall’s Tau of 0.06901 (p < 0.0001). The ASI is a much more effective indicator of yard space than count in this case.

7. This cross-cultural comparison shows that ASI can provide a newer view or use structure than artifact distribution by count. At Monticello’s Site 8, areas around three of the four houses are distinguished by high artifact densities. On the other hand, at New Town Locus 4, both house areas show low artifact densities, similar to the background artifact density across the site. Looking for yard space using artifact density would provide varied results at these two sites, while ASI succeeds in detecting site maintenance in both cases.